

EXPLORING BANDARBAN THROUGH TREKKING TRAILS: A NEW HORIZON FOR COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Bandarban is regarded as one of the most attractive travel destinations in Bangladesh. This is the most potential tourist destination that will certainly flourish in near future. But no significant attempts have been made to explore and exploit this potential sector in Bandarban. Consequently, the benefit of tourism has remained very limited for the local people. The purpose of the study was to identify and explore different trekking routes of Bandarban for adventure-loving tourists. Further, another objective was to identify possible further involvement of the local communities in tourism through which they can upgrade their economic status. Community-based tourism development can be the most suitable concept not only for community development but for tourism development in Bandarban also. In this study, some potential trekking trails have been identified as well as discovering some potential ways of involving local ethnic communities living alongside the trekking trails in tourism.

Keywords: Trekking trail, community involvement, community-based tourism, Trail Village, Bandarban

Introduction:

Bandarban – ‘the roof of Bangladesh’, as described by the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (the National Tourism Organization of Bangladesh), has become a hot cake to tourists for the last few years. Its flora and fauna, hills and forests, craggy waterfalls and zigzag rivers, bamboo cottages of its ethnic people and their lifestyle have made this picturesque

hill tract a popular eco-tourism destination of tourists from home and abroad. Most of the highest peaks of Bangladesh are located in Bandarban district, as well as two of the highest lakes of Bangladesh- Boga Lake and Raikhiang Lake. There are at least 11 different ethnic groups living in the district besides the Bengalis, including the Bomong, Marma, Mru, Tanchangya, Khyang, Tripura, Lushei, Khumi, Chak, Kuki, Chakma, Rakhine or Arakanese, Riyang, Usui and Pankho. Law and order situation in Bandarban is simply the best in Bangladesh.

Bandarban is a hidden paradise hiding some of the rarest beauties of Bangladesh. Bandarban is gifted with green serene hills, serpentine hilly rivers, unknown trekking trails leading to mysterious waterfalls and caves, mysterious lakes between valleys, wild animals and birds inhabiting in green hilly forests, varied ethnic communities and their unique cultural rituals etc. But, as paradise is not made for all, the heavenly Bandarban does not show its real paradise to all the tourists. Unknown and mysterious trekking trails are the only way through the paradise. Only those who have the courage to explore it can get the rare opportunity to walk through the paradise. New tourist spots are being explored and tourists are quite curious to visit these spots. Adventure tourism is a new concept to Bangladeshi tourists, and Bandarban is the one of few destinations for adventure tourism. Different remote spots are being explored by the drifters and soon these are becoming so popular that many others are getting interested to visit these places. Most importantly, most awe-inspiring spots have not been explored by the tourists yet.

The concept of trekking tourism through different unknown trails and home stay at 'Trail Village' will be a breakthrough for tourism in Bandarban. A "Trail Village" is a hub along a long-distance trail where tourists can rest, enjoy scenery, services, and culture of the community with its own character and charm. These 'Trail Villages' can be developed as tourist-service-points providing home stay facilities or camp ground, food and beverage etc. A Trail Village may also arrange cultural show for tourists for payment and sell handicrafts. Planned tourism development in trekking trails and the provision for home stay in adjacent villages can change the economic condition of poor tribal people living in remote areas. In this paper the trail is proposed to be named as Bandarban Wild Trail (BWT). A major objective of the Bandarban Wild Trail (BWT) concept is to bring tourism benefits and to improve livelihoods in remote ethnic communities of Bandarban. Another aim of the paper is to refer the idea as role model for other hill districts (i.e. Rangamati and Khagrachari) to be used in future. Now the time has come to explore and exploit the tourism sector of this hill district through which the livelihoods of the local people will improve tremendously and sustainably.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to identify and explore exotic trekking trails through the hill tracts of Bandarban so that ethnic communities living along the trail can be directly involved in tourism for their economic benefit.

For that purpose, specific objectives of the study are to-

- a. Identify and explore new and exotic trekking trails in remote areas of Bandarban.
- b. Identify ethnic villages of different communities along the trekking trail that can be developed as Trail Villages or tourism-service-points for tourists.
- c. Identify the facilities required by tourists in different Trail Villages during trekking.
- d. Investigate possible ways of and strategies for involving local ethnic communities in community-based tourism.

Methodology

The study is based on basic research conducted by an extensive level of field visit and primary data collection. Physically visiting the trails and adjacent villages was inevitable since the aim of the study was to explore new and exotic trekking trails and involve local ethnic communities in tourism activities. The trail described in this study is to be found in Ruma (A sub-district of Bandarban district). This sub-district was physically visited along with an experienced ethnic tour guide, Mr. Panuam Bawm, who helped a lot in exploring the trekking trails from 14th to 28th August, 2013. During this journey, key tourism stakeholders –hoteliers, restaurant owners, ethnic farmers, local transport owners, village craftsmen, government officials, and the tourists, –were interviewed formally and informally. All the 8 hotels, 6 restaurants, 2 handicraft shops in Ruma Bazar were surveyed. Representatives of all the 2 boat owners' association and the only jeep owners' association were interviewed. 6 cottages in Boga Lake and 1 in Keokradong were also surveyed. Focus group discussions were held with different actual and potential stakeholders for their opinion regarding tourism development in their area, so that a local viewpoint regarding tourism can come to consideration. Different development alternatives were found as an outcome of focus group discussions with the ethnic people living in villages adjacent to the proposed trekking trail.

Literature Review

Tourism activities using natural attractions in remote rural areas can be an important source of economic diversification and livelihood opportunity (Ashley et al., 2001; UNWTO, 2002). For this reason, many

countries regarded it as an important and integral tool of their development strategy (Jenkins, 1991). United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has attempted to develop a firm global agenda for the support of tourism as an approach for development in general, and poverty alleviation in particular, for the developing countries (Ferguson, 2007). Bangladesh is one of the most promising developing countries with all the signs of better future. Thus tourism has become an important sector for economic growth in Bangladesh like other developing countries in the world (Islam 2009). Rahman (2010) also emphasized that, for Bangladesh tourism has major effects on economy and livelihood of people living in destination areas.

Bangladesh is mainly a country of exceedingly flat, low-lying land. From the physiographical point of view, the country can be divided into hills, uplifted land blocks, and the majority alluvial plains with very low mean elevation above sea level (Rashid 1991). The only significant areas of hilly terrain are the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the narrow south-eastern part of the country and some other hilly regions in Sylhet division in the northeast part of Bangladesh. Hill trekking is quite new in Bangladesh. Trekking is basically a multi-day trip through the trails of relatively unspoiled natural areas. The purpose of trekking is exploring and enjoying the untouched natural scenery. But, if it is Bandarban, the ultimate reward for the deserving tourists is not witnessing the unparalleled natural beauty only, but the opportunity to meet the unique culture of some of the most colourful ethnic groups of the world also. Experienced trekkers & adventure travellers who are looking for a new and exciting challenge and an adventure of a lifetime are the target market of this trekking tourism in Bandarban.

Tourism development is expected in Bandarban for the greater benefit of the local people- both the ethnic and non-ethnic. Tourism may offer immense scope in employment generation, poverty alleviation and maintaining ecological balance in Bangladesh especially in Bandarban. But it must be in a sustainable way without hampering the nature of this paradise and unique culture of the ethnic people and for their long-term economic benefit. Community Based Tourism (CBT) is another recent approach suggested by tourism scholars for bridging the tourism actors with the local community and the poor (Manayara & Jones, 2007; Sebele, 2010; Harrison & Schipani, 2007). Benefits from community-based tourism can be a combination of economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits. The aim of community-based ecotourism is to unlock opportunities for the poor rather than expanding the overall size of the sector. These opportunities include economic gain, other livelihood benefits or participation in decision making (Ashley et al., 2001). In sub-Saharan African countries tourism has been an important component of both economic development and biodiversity conservation strategies (Nelson, 2004). The effectiveness of

CBT has been claimed in the rural landscapes of some African countries like, Southern Africa, Gambia and Botswana (Ashley, 2006).

The focus of this paper is to design and implement trekking tourism activities in a collaborative manner that strengthen the economy of mountain people ensuring sustainable management of ecology and natural resources. The final beneficiaries of the tourism development will be mountain communities. In this paper the concept of Bandarban Wild Trail (BWT) is described and proposed to be developed as an iconic and significantly new tourism product for Hill Districts of Bangladesh. The ultimate objective of the concept is managing tourism in line with sustainable tourism best practices, generating alternative livelihood options and income for local communities and contributing to the conservation of natural resource and cultural heritage of Bandarban. The successful implementation of the BWT concept can be used as role model for community-based tourism development in natural areas both in Bangladesh and other countries around the world.

Scopes for Involving Local Community in Trekking Tourism

Community-based tourism encompasses a range of activities and facilities where there is every possibility to involve local community (see Figure 1). Local people with a role in the Community-based Tourism (CBT) program may include home-stay families, community tour guides, craftsmen, performers, community leaders, local restaurants, farmers, and other interesting roles. Guests may stay with a local family in a home-stay, in a community-owned lodge, or even a community campsite. Local transport is used when traveling during the program. From the very specific viewpoint of Bandarban, along the trekking trails through remote hilly areas Trail Village offering tourism service should be established. The whole community should be involved in establishing, running, and maintaining the facilities. The “Sardar” (leader) of the community will be responsible for coordination. Earning through a Trail Villages could be shared by the members of the community who is maintaining the facilities. In this way there could be a sudden uplift of income among the ethnic tribal groups.

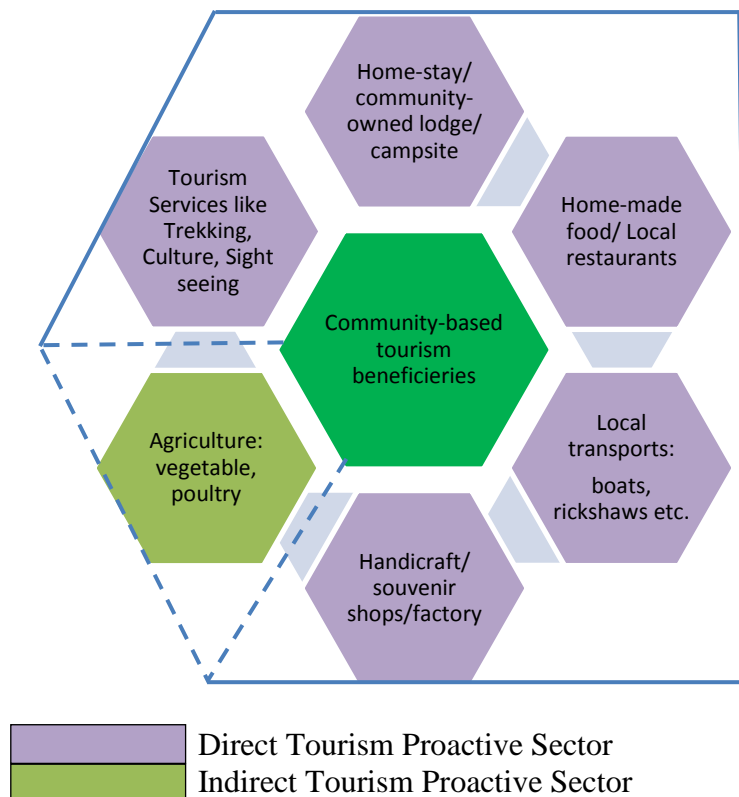


Figure 1: Sectors of community-based tourism where community can be involved

The Proposed Bandarban Wild Trail (BWT)

During the field visit, the trekking trail was designed to connect some of the most exciting places of Bandarban that will be the ultimate destination of adventure tourists in near future if the proposed trekking trail is taken into consideration for its implementation. It is proposed here in this paper to be named as Bandarban Wild Trail (BWT). It will lead to the following exiting spots of Bandarban-

Mysterious Boga Lake:

It is the most popular natural lake in Bangladesh and the icon of Bandarban. It is about 2000fts above sea level & 17km away from Ruma Bazar. Some geologists thought that Bogalake was a crater of a volcano which might have erupted sometime in the past. Myths relating Boga Lake made it mysterious to tourists. Local ethnic people also believe that it is the cave of Dragon Lord. Interestingly, the depth of Boga Lake is still unknown.



Chingri Jhiri (Shrimp Waterfall):

This beautiful small waterfall is located on the trail from Boga Lake to Keokradong. It takes around 90 minutes on foot to reach Chingri Jhiri. During the rainy season it takes the look of a young lady with its purl. In the crystal water of Chingri Jhiri one can see shrimp swimming there. That's why it was named as Shrimp Waterfall.



Keokradong Hill:

Keokradong is the most famous hill of Bangladesh. It was the highest peak of Bangladesh before some other higher peaks were discovered. It is yet popular among the adventure tourists as the view from its peak of the hill tracts is simply unbelievable.



Zingsiam Fall:

Zingsiam is one of the most breathtaking waterfalls in the entire Chittagong Hill Tracts. Zingsiam is actually a three step water fall located at the foothill of Rumnapara, a territory of the Bawm community. A beautiful girl named Zingsiam of Rumnapara committed suicide by jumping of the cliff of the more than 80 feet tall second step of this waterfall. Then after, it was named Zingsiam Fall.



Double Falls:

Tlubong Waterfalls (Double Falls) is situated near Sunsang Para, another Bawm Village. Two beautiful Jhiri Prangsha and Paikkhiang meet from two different sides of the hill and made this incredibly beautiful falls.



Jadipai Waterfall:

It is another heavenly waterfall that makes Bandarban heavenly. It is located in Jadipai para and is different from other waterfalls because of its width. The waterfall makes the entire area smoky with the water crumb. Cristal clear water and the stony body have made it something out of the world.



Baklai Fall:

Probably Baklai Waterfalls is the highest (370 feet) waterfall of Bangladesh. Baklai falls is located at Baklai para of Thanchi Upazila in Bandarban District. It is very toiling to reach the waterfall but after reaching there one will forget all fatigue. The reward of all the sufferings is the Baklai itself.

Trekking Direction and Timing

The Bandarban Wild Trail (BWT) is probably the most exciting trail in Bangladesh. It goes through a number of exceptionally beautiful places in Bandarban that are still unknown to the mass tourists and thus full of mystery.

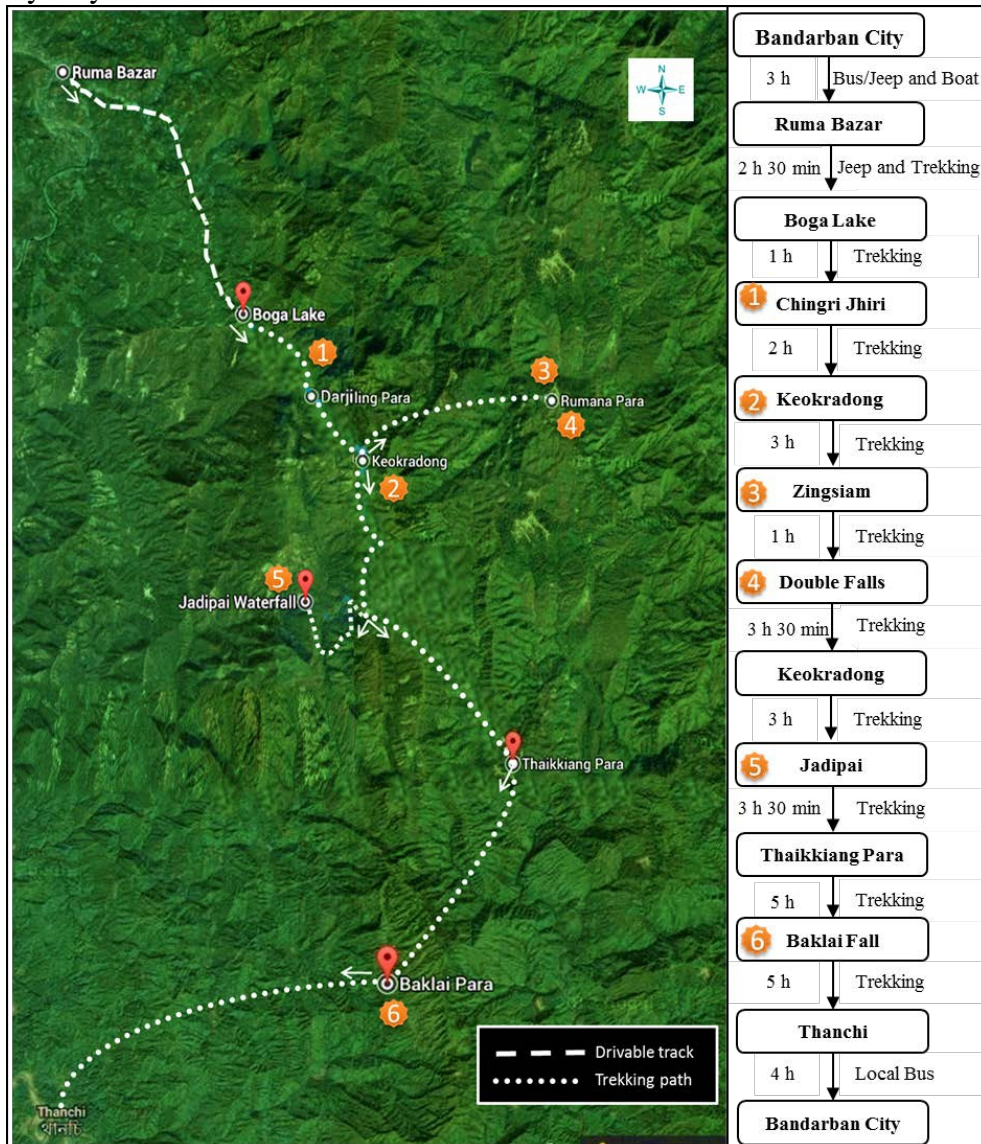


Figure 2: The Bandarban Wild Trail (BWT)

Day-1: From Bandarban City (district headquarter) to Ruma, tourists can use local bus or ‘Chander Gari’ (local jeep) as road is quite drivable there. But they have to cross the river Sangu by boat to go to Ruma Bazar (Market). Boga Lake going jeeps are available from Ruma Bazar, but these

jeeps can cover a distance of 11km and then tourists have to cover the rest of 6km by trekking to get to Boga Lake. After swimming in the clear and cold water of Boga Lake and then having their lunch at Lake-side Cottages tourists will need to take rest. Lake-side Cottages can accommodate around 200 tourists for overnight stay. Day-2: After breakfast in the early morning of the next day tourists will trek for one hour to see Chingri Jhiri. From Chingri Jhiri to Keokradong it will take two hours through trekking trail. In the valley of Keokradong there is a cottage where tourists can take lunch. From this point, it will take three hours to get to Jingsiam Waterfall. But, it will be dark when trekkers will find them in front of Jingsiam. They will have to stay overnight there in the adjacent village Rumana Para. Home stay facilities and food services are to be developed there for trekkers in a locally appropriate manner for the economic benefit of the local people. Day-3: In the morning, tourists will be stunned by witnessing two out of this world waterfall of Bandarban that are still unmarked in the tourism map. From Jingsiam it will take about an hour to reach Double falls. Then trekkers can go back to the valley of Keokradong by trekking for other three and a half-hour. Overnight stay will be required there. Day-4: In the morning, tourists can climb the Keokradong to have a 360 degree view of the surrounding hilly area. Then they have to start trekking for Jadipai Waterfall. It will take around three and a half-hour. The unbelievably gorgeous Jadipai will simply touch the heart of any adventure loving tourist. Tourists will remember the day for lifetime. At night trekkers have to accommodate themselves in the nearby village Jadipai Para. Day-5: On the 5th day, trekkers have to walk all the day. They have to stop walking at Thaikkhang Para for lunch. After lunch, they will have to walk for five hours to get to Baklai Para. Overnight stay will be required. Day-6: After enjoying the scenic view of Baklai Waterfall, the highest waterfall of Bangladesh, trekkers can start for Thanchi. Tired trekkers will need rest after reaching Thanchi. They will have to stay there overnight and on the next day they can take local bus for Bandarban City.

Facilities Required for Developing ‘Trail Village’

From the field visit, some ethnic villages adjacent to the trail were found potential to be developed as Trail Village. These Trail Villages can be developed as trekking service points where tourists need basic facilities like food and beverages, accommodation, wash, and recreation. Trail Villages can help trekkers for their trekking and also provide income for the local community. Some of the trekking service points (Trail Village) and facilities required to be developed are shown in the following figure.

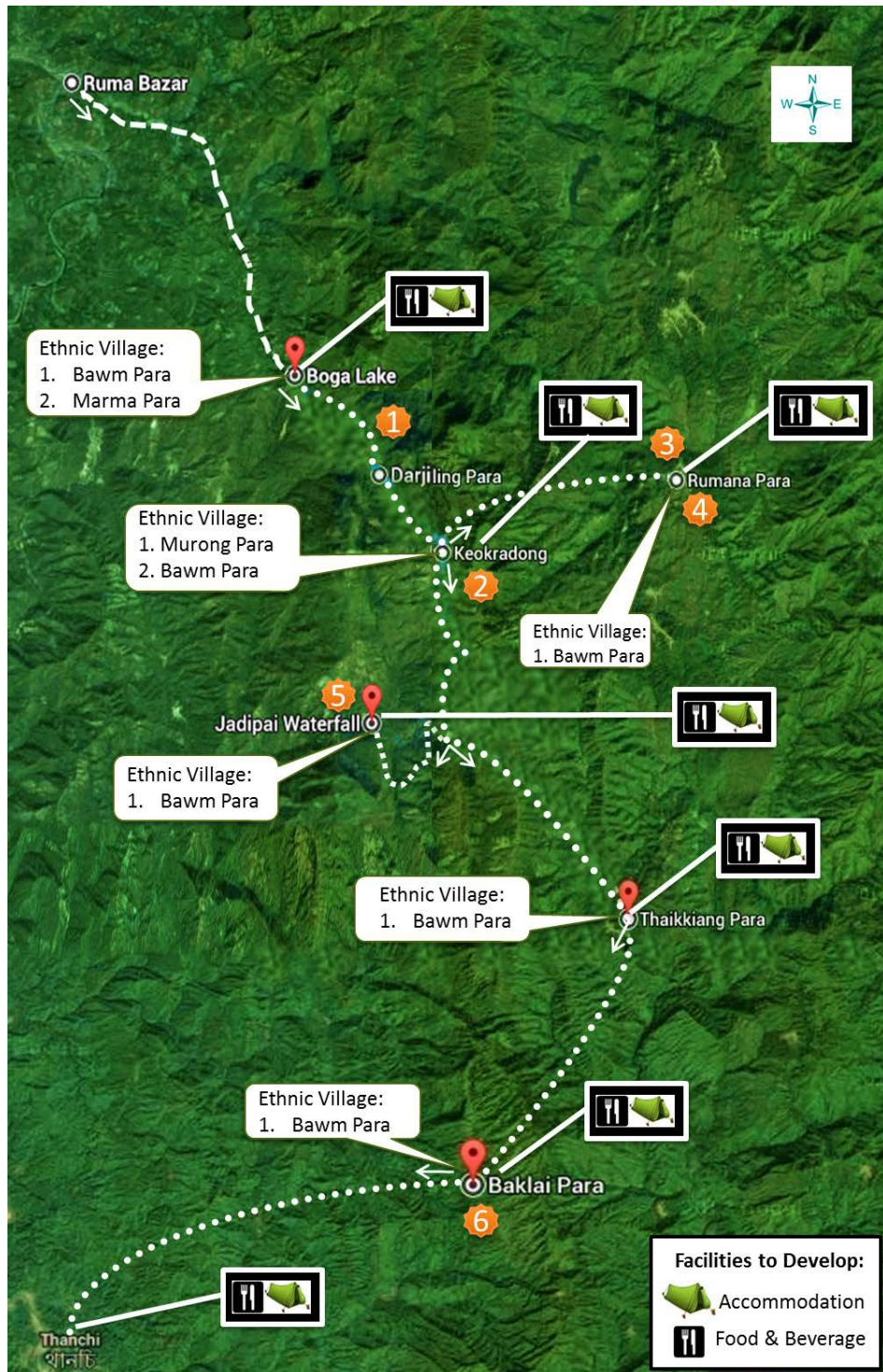


Figure 3: Ethnic Villages along the Trail and Facilities Required for Trekkers

Trail Villages can be developed in the following points:

Boga Lake: Accommodation and food service arrangements are already there. These are not that good in quality for serving quality tourists.

Keokradong: Accommodation and food service establishments with minimum quality standard should be developed. Here, minimum quality refers to comfortable accommodation facility and hygienic food so that at least rough and tough trekkers can carry on their trekking.

Rumana Para: No arrangement for accommodation and food service is there. These should be developed.

Jadipai Para: No facilities have been developed yet. Accommodation and dining facility should be developed.

Thaikkhang Para: Accommodation and dining facility should be developed.

Baklai Para: Accommodation and food service establishments should be developed.

Thanchi: Accommodation and food service establishments should be developed.

Facilities for the trekkers and tourists in these Trail Villages may include:

Home stay: The ultimate solution for the overnight accommodation is home stay facility. Trekking team expect a better place to spend night. They could be accommodated in the rooms exclusively made and maintained for trekkers.

Platform for mounting tents: tents, mattresses and other sleeping objects will be supplied by the community. In exchange they will charge reasonable tariff from the tourists.

Dining facility: for breakfast, lunch, dinner, tea etc. a beautifully decorated open restaurant type establishment with local motifs could be built. Trained household cooks may supply foods as per the taste of the tourists. Charge could be a bit high.

Open-air stage: a multipurpose open air stage should be constructed for performing cultural shows and arts by the local ethnic performers as well as the tourists. In peak tourism season, this sort of performance could be made compulsory and the cost could be included in the package.

A small handicraft shop in the Trail Village: Local craftsmanship could be displayed there and the tourists should be motivated to buy the items.

Wash and toilet facility: water being scarce in supply on top of the hills, the tourists could be charged for use of this facility.

Strategies for the Community-based Tourism Development in the Proposed Trail Villages along the Bandarban Wild Trail

(i) There is a need for responsible guidelines for developing trekking routes and collaborating with local communities.

(ii) Accommodation facility for the trekkers should be improved and formalized so that the local people can earn more. At present the trekkers are accommodated in below standard tin-shed rest houses having no good facility for sleeping and wash room. In places the trekkers stay in the houses of the tribal people which some time may not be liked both by the tourists as well as the community people because (a) poor tribal people are not in a position to arrange for good accommodation by providing beds and other facilities, and (b) the tourists also want a bit comfortable night-stay after a whole-day trekking. Besides, the trekkers pointed out the absence of good wash rooms with which they are used. Rearing up the pet pigs sometimes is not well accepted by the plain land tourists. Consequently it is not realized by the local community that accommodation can also be a formal trade, rather they consider it as hospitality. So, for the night stay they formally do not charge any specific amount of money. It depends on the whims of the tourists how much to pay. Therefore, by upgrading night-stay facilities, some guidelines may be developed to fix up the prices for these services offered by the local community.

(iii) At present the trekkers have to carry dry food and fruits as there exists no formal restaurant in the places where the trekkers have to take their lunch, dinner and breakfast. Some time they have to carry live chicks, eggs and request the local people to cook for them. Although there is no big difference in food menu of the tribal people and the plain land trekkers, but as of the process of preparing meals differs widely, the tourists can not enjoy the food to taste. Beside, use of same kitchen-wares sometimes makes the trekkers fussy and fretful. So, establishment of separate restaurants in the proposed camp grounds and train the tribal girls in Bangla recipe could be good source of income for the local community. All the ingredients are available locally.

(iv) Guiding has become a good source of income for the local youths. But the guides are all self-made and self-developed. They do not have formal training in guiding. So, if the quality of the guide services could be raised through training, the rate could be much higher benefitting the local youths. Now costs for guide services vary as per the number days for which the guides are hired and also the destinations selected. Presently as this service is not performed professionally, the trekkers observed that sometime the guides are not that much serious in providing their services. Besides, a guide line could be developed to establish a justified guide/tourist ratio depending on the number of tourists in the group and the perils of the routes. It is to be

noted here that for trekking the trekkers have to hire the guide services from Ruma only.

(v) To diversify involvement of local community members in tourism, alternative activities can be considered. For example, cultural show by the tribal people could be arranged in places where the tourists and the trekkers have a night-stay. Cultural show at night could refresh the trekkers and the community could charge some fee for the show. The tribal communities specially the Bawm, Marma, Tripura, Khyang and the Tonchangya people have rich cultural heritages. In many places of Bandarban, these communities perform the cultural program for the tourists for money. They also feel proud to exhibit their own cultural performances. Culture could be turned into a major tourism product in this hill district.

(vi) At specific Trail Village, one shop could be established to sell the locally produced handicrafts, and also items needed for trekking.

But it should be keep in mind that each community has its own uniqueness, so needs separate planning and strategy for developing CBT suitable for it.

Conclusion

The economy of Bangladesh is predominantly based on agriculture and garments industry. For countrywide rapid economic development, transformation from a traditional agricultural economy to an industrial economy is difficult for many reasons. Lack of huge capital, good governance, and foreign assistance lead many regions to go for small scale tourism development in community level. Community-based tourism leads to sustainable development that protects the natural and cultural resources of a community while contributing to the livelihood improvement of the local community as well as delivering satisfaction to tourists. In Bandarban, community-based tourism, as a potential development sector in general and for poverty reduction in particular, can bring changes in socio-economic lives of rural people. The proposed Bandarban Wild Trail (BWT) and the concept of Trail Village can bring a breakthrough in local economy by delivering financial benefits to the ethnic communities of Bandarban. It can bring some alternative livelihood opportunities for the local ethnic people other than traditional Jhum cultivation which is commonly known as slash and burn method or shifting cultivation. Slash and burn method or shifting cultivation is damaging for ecology. Thus, community-based tourism can be a suitable tool for sustainable tourism development in Bandarban as well as other nature-based tourism destinations of Bangladesh. A decisive and inclusive plan is inevitable recognizing the importance of community-based tourism in participation with the government, NGOs, tourism and related organizations and the community.

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